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AUTHOR Schweiker, Karyn E.
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ABSTRACT

This study explored if and how the beliefs of emergent literacy teachers influenced their facilitation of parental reading at home. Due to the extent and findings of current research on the importance of parental reading in children's emergent literacy, one might expect that emergent literacy teachers would be cognizant of this knowledge and want to promote parental reading and proper interaction. Twenty emergent literacy teachers were surveyed concerning their promotion of parental reading, and based on this data, one teacher was selected for a follow-up case study. Results of the survey showed that all 20 teachers believed that parental reading at home was important to their emergent literacy programs; however, teachers' access to their school libraries was poor, and 8 out of the 20 teachers had no method at all for encouraging parental reading to children. The teacher selected for the case study had a very active program to encourage parental reading, including sending books home with children each night and recording what was read to them and by whom. She also contributed to parent education about reading aloud by providing literature to parents on the importance of reading to their children. (Contains 14 references.) (EV)

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The Emergent Literacy Teacher and Parental Reading At Home

Karyn E. Schweiker
West Virginia University

Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Eastern Educational Research Association, Sarasota, Florida, February, 1994

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The Emergent Literacy Teacher and Parental Reading at Home

By Karyn E. Schweiker
West Virginia University

Storybook reading has received more research attention than any other area in emergent literacy research (Sulzby & Teale, 1991). Over the past forty years significant data has shown positive relationships between early childhood experiences in being read to at home and such factors as vocabulary development (Burroughs, 1972), level of language development in prereaders (Chomsky, 1972), children's eagerness to read (Mason & Blanton, 1971), becoming literate before formal schooling (Clark, 1976), and success in beginning reading at school (Durkin, 1974 -1975).

Research has also supplied answers to the components of parental storybook reading that serve to increase those areas of learning for the pre-school child. Ninio and Bruner (1978) in their research on reading of picture books by mothers to their young children, have found that their actions consisted of certain dialogue cycles and a standard action format. Snow (1983) has discovered a routinized nature to storybook reading through her analysis of a parent-child readings of picture books. Sulzby and Teale (1987) supported Ninio and Bruner's earlier findings concerning routine patterns in their research on alphabet-book-reading episodes with young children.

These findings on routinized storybook-reading practices have helped to explain how storybook reading contributes to literacy. These routines have been found to improve oral language acquisition and provide predictable formats that enable children to learn how to participate in the parental reading activity. These predictable formats establish a scaffold which enables the child to complete a task that is normally beyond his or her capability (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976). It has been theorized that these routinized interactions have enabled a child to develop expectations in regards to the types of language found among storybooks as well as books in general. The child utilizes these learned expectations in later years to help guide and confirm independent attempts at decoding (Sulzby and Teale, 1991).

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While parental reading to children has been found beneficial to a child's future reading readiness, certain variations in that reading have proven to be more beneficial than others. Both Ninio (1980) and Heath's research (1982) has suggested that certain methods of reading have more positive effects upon a child's vocabulary development than do others. Ninio's study of picture-book reading concerned both high and low socio-economic mothers and infants. A relationship was found between mother-infant interaction styles and vocabulary development. The high socio-economic mothers' eliciting style of reading was positively associated with more productive vocabulary development. Heath found that both "mainstream" (middle class) and working class white parents read storybooks to their children. The difference in their readings was related to the differences in their interactions. Mainstream parents interaction enabled their children to learn the basic concepts of reading by linking information from books to the contents of the children's lives. Working class parents tended not to extend this information. Heath has concluded that while these reading episodes enhanced the working class children's achievement in the early years of reading instruction it did not prepare them for upper elementary grades and high-level comprehension in reading. It appears that the type of interaction during reading experience is as important as the interactive parental reading episode.

Due to the extent of the current research concerning the importance of parental reading to an emergent literacy programs (Ninio, 1980; Heath,1982; Sulzby & Teale, 1987), one might expect that emergent literacy teachers would be cognizant of this knowledge and want to promote parental reading and proper interaction. Having established the importance of parental reading in an emergent literacy program there is a need to know the relationship between teachers' awareness of parental reading and their implementation of a program to facilitate practice.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore how the beliefs of an emergent literacy teacher influenced her facilitation of parental reading at home. In the county in which this research was done emergent literacy teachers are handicapped by policies that tend to refuse the use of school libraries to kindergarten children.

Method

Population

Participants in this study included all twenty emergent literacy teachers from the same county who taught at seventeen different schools. One teacher from the population was selected as a case study due to her implementation of a parental reading program. All teachers voluntarily participated in the study and the case study teacher was given a code name of Agnes in order to protect her confidentiality. The participants range in teaching experience from three to twenty-seven years, with the majority of the teachers either having completed or in the process of completing a masters degree.

Data Collection

Each of the twenty teachers were surveyed concerning their promotion of parental reading. All surveys were completed and returned. Follow-up phone calls were made to clarify statements from the survey. The case study teacher was selected from the population on the basis of her unique point of view. The case study teacher was then interviewed for one to two hours using an informal semi-structured interview schedule based upon the research question. A follow-up interview lasting approximately thirty minutes was conducted in order to clarify points as needed after the initial interview had been transcribed. The teacher's parental reading program was then observed during three random morning sessions and detailed field notes were recorded. Documents were collected in the form of the parental reading guide book, logs of children's nightly readings, and teacher lesson plans.

Instrumentation

Two instruments were used in this study: a survey and a formal interview of the case study teacher. The survey was constructed so as to determine the teacher's beliefs concerning parental reading at home and any influences that may have affected the implementation of that belief. The survey contained four open-ended questions which pertained to the teacher's belief concerning parental reading; noting the school library's regulations for early childhood children; assessing whether the emergent literacy teacher had supplementary resources for library home use; and the teacher's implemented program to encourage parental reading.

Data Analysis

Surveys. The surveys were analyzed to determine the number of teachers who stated a belief in the need for parental reading at home as part of an emergent literacy program. Those schools housing library facilities were noted and the type of restrictions regarding early childhood student's check out process. Finally, the teacher's method of encouraging parental reading was recorded. This information can be found in Table 1.

Interview. Since this is a descriptive case study, the interview was transcribed, and a chain of evidence was established. This chain of evidence was created by rechecking with other sources of evidence including the surveys of all participants, the case study teacher's lesson plans, her student logs and direct classroom observations. These were then shared with the case study teacher to check for construct validity. Both internal and external validity is inapplicable, since this study is a descriptive case study which includes the entire population. Reliability was obtained through the establishment of a case study protocol. The case study protocol is an instrument that contains the procedures and general rules that have been used throughout the study. The case study protocol can be found in Appendix A.

Results

Descriptive report of surveys

Teachers beliefs about parental reading. The results of the survey found that all twenty emergent literacy teachers believed that parental reading at home was important to their emergent literacy programs. Their answers included:

> "It increases the student's interest in reading books."
> "It allows parents to become a part of the learning process."
> "I believe that children who are read to at home are more familiar with the kinds of reading concepts we cover, such as author, title, etc."
> "I have read research where parental read provides a base for their reading skills at school."
> "I read Jim Trelease's book about reading to your child and can really

understand its importance to our early childhood program."

Emergent literacy teachers access to school libraries. Five of the twenty-one emergent literacy teachers taught at schools without libraries. Of the sixteen schools that maintained a library, eleven emergent literacy teachers were not scheduled for a library time in order for their students to check-out books. For the four remaining early childhood classrooms, three classes were permitted to check-out two books once a week, while one class was allowed two books every two weeks.

Teacher's alternate methods for access to books. Seven emergent literacy teachers had found alternate ways to provide their student's with access to reading material. Two teachers had attempted to establish a classroom library in which students were permitted to take home classroom books on a limited basis. For instance, one teacher allowed her children to take out one book and upon its return may take out another. The other teacher sent a book home once a week during the second half of the school year. Two other teachers who did not have a classroom library sent home multiple copies of the Big Book with small groups of children at one time. This occurred only after the Big Book had been read aloud to all children during the course of the school year. Another teacher sent home a certain book with a snack each night to a different student. Once the entire class had had the opportunity to take that book home she started over with a new book. This activity resulted in each student having the opportunity to take a book home approximately once a month. Two of the emergent literacy teachers relied upon the Chapter One teacher to provide books to some or all of their children once a week. Only the case study teacher established a classroom library that permitted students access to library books on a daily basis.

In the survey teachers, who did not have books sent home, responded with comments as to why they did not send them. Below were some of the comments made by those teachers:

"Well, I don't think it's fair, but the librarian just won't take them."

"We no longer receive county funds for books."

"The principal at our school doesn't support the emergent literacy teacher in her need for students to go to the library."

"I don't have enough books to lend out."

"If we sent books home, they've lose them or they would get damaged."

Teachers' methods for encouraging parental reading. While every emergent literacy teacher remarked on their belief in parental reading, their method of encouragement varied. Eight out of the twenty one teachers stated that they had no method at all. Some of these teachers added comments to why they did not have a method:

"Our School does not use the Book-it program."

"I don't use Book-it because I feel it doesn't encouraging parental reading. These parents would sign anything just so their kids could get a reward."

"We read to our kids so much at school that they get the message that it's important at home, too."

"We encourage parental reading by encouraging the students to read anytime during free period."

"This type of program is time consuming, so you need an aide who is willing to do this."

"There are things I want to stress in my program and you can't do it all."

Two of the teachers utilized the parent meeting at the beginning of the year as a means of communicating a need for parents to read to their children. Three emergent literacy teachers utilized the Book-it program. This program provides children who read a certain amount of books per month to receive a free pan pizza. This program extends over a five month period. The read-aloud program was another method to encourage parental reading. This method involved parents coming into the classroom and reading aloud to the whole class. The teachers, who used this method to encourage parental reading at home, stated that the added parental involvement at school with books increases their reading at home.

Of the remaining eight emergent literacy teachers three enlisted parental reading at home through the Chapter One program. Chapter One teachers were designated by the emergent literacy teacher as the providers of books to encourage reading at home. These teachers had encouraged parental reading during home visits at the beginning of the year and during conferences. One teacher walkded her children to the public libraryon a weekly basis. The final four teachers had a specific program designed to encourage parental reading. One teacher had her own classroom library which was set-up by her aide and allowed book check -out as frequently as the child wanted. In addition parental reading was encouraged through the Book-it program. Another teacher, who had begun to compile books for home distribution on a weekly basis, used a book log.

This book log contains the books the parent has read to the child during the school year. The "Lunch Box" program was an invention of the third teacher who sent books home for the children to read to the parents. This program required that the same book be sent home through the entire student group before the next book is dispatched. The teacher explained that this encouraged the parents to read to their child by introducing reading interaction at home. The final teacher was the case study teacher whose program directly encouraged parental reading at home.

Descriptive information of case study. The case study teacher has been teaching as an emergent literacy teacher for twenty seven years and will be referred to as Agnes. At the time of the initial contact with the case study teacher she mentioned that she had a book program set-up in order to send books home for parental reading. This brought up the topic of emergent literacy teachers not having access to library usage for their students. "As you know, our children do not go to the library. I mean the librarian doesn't allow early childhood students to check-out books."

In the subsequent study a detailed explanation of her program was provided. "So last year I got great big plastic tubs and filled them with mainly my own books I've collected over the years. I've been putting these books into ziplock plastic bags and they are taken home to be read by a parent. They take two books home each evening of the weekday. The next day when they bring it back we write down who has read to them. Now if it has been a busy night and they weren't able to be read to, then they just take it home again. On the weekend they take four books home. Each child has their own looseleaf book in which is written every book that has been read to them at home the whole year. And when the children are able to read some books on their own, we turn the notebook over to the back part and record the title and date. So in that way the they have a list of all the books that has been read to them and all those they can read during the whole kindergarten year. I give it to them at the end of the year so they can continue it in first grade." During her classroom observation, the aide was logging in the children's books in their looseleaf binders.

Explanatory Information of case study. Agnes's beliefs motivated her to encourage parental reading. These beliefs were fostered by her research and professional development. "I read an article in the Science Christian Monitor by Jim Trelease on the importance of reading to your child at home. That made me think: How can we expect parents to read to their kids if they don't have books and don't know what kind of books to read. Then I found a book by Dee Searling that explains to parents exactly how to read to their child. I decided that everyone of my parents would

have a copy of it."

These beliefs are also connected to her philosophy of teaching. "Parental reading gets parents involved with their children's reading. They have heard that reading is important, but when they get two books a night they see how important it is to their child and they respond. I have a large variety of great children's literature. After a couple of weeks of reading the different books parents begin to see the importance of it, especially to their children."

While Agnes explained that this program was new for her, it was based upon a need she perceived after many years of teaching. "I believe that parents are always being told to read to their children, but nobody ever tells them how to read or what books to read to their children. I knew that parents also don't have access to the public library. They don't know what good children's literature is."

Agnes further clarified her responsibility to inform and encourage parental reading. "I believe it is my job to inform the parents, because I am the authority and I have the information. I know what is a good book and I can give the parents information on how to read to their children. If you don't educate the parents you can't get anywhere. At the beginning of the year during the parent meeting I start by explaining about the emergent literacy program. At that time I give a lot of hand-outs to the parents. They receive both the Jim Trelease article and the Dee Searling's booklet. Let me add that I don't just hand out papers I highlight the important parts first."

"We have some people who are teachers and love to teach and then we have people who just have a job."

Conclusions

This study explores those factors that may facilitate the implementation of parental reading as part of an emergent literacy program. Through that exploration it was discovered that while all teachers professed a belief in the need for parents to read to their children, most did not have access to school libraries. These teachers instead encouraged the parents during conferences and meetings to read at home with their own materials. Some of the teachers utilized Book-it and read aloud programs to provide added encouragement for parental reading. Four of the emergent literacy teachers developed parental reading programs in which encouragement and reading materials were provided. Out of the twenty-one emergent literacy teachers only the case study

teacher provided encouragement, reading materials and an instructional guide book for the parental reading. The case study teacher through her strong philosophical view supported by her research felt it was her "job" to supply parents with encouragement, proper reading materials, and instruction on interactive reading.

It appears that the majority of the emergent literacy teachers assumed that parents knew the proper way to read to their children or they believed that parental reading was in and of itself sufficient. Though all the teachers professed a belief in parental reading, only the case study teacher who provided guidance as well as reading materials, professed a relationship between reading at home with her emergent literacy program. This is supported by Buike, Burke, and Duffy (1980) who reported on teacher beliefs and their relationship to teaching practices using the Proposition about Reading Instructional Inventory. This study attempted to relate reading conceptions of teachers to their instructional practices. The results of this study gave only superficial support for the hypothesis that teachers operate from implicit theories of reading in relationship to their programs. It was found that the belief was maintained only when the position was extreme or biased. The case study teacher is unique in her belief that a complete emergent literacy program involves not only the techniques and resources for implementation, but the conviction and philosophy that it is the right thing to do. Those teachers who faced a lack of resources verbally stated their beliefs, but did not take steps to implement them. This relates to Hoffman's findings (1991) which confirms that a teacher's belief may exert some influence on a particular position, but often the effects of the belief are overwhelmed by the type or lack of available materials.

This study is of importance to emergent literacy pre-service teaching programs by emphasizing the need to develop an understanding of emergent literacy theory. Knowledge of emergent literacy theory enables teachers to develop a philosophy which can promote emergent literacy practices. All too frequently teachers are taught methods without the theoretical context which gives those methods meaning. If the significance of the teaching methods can be put in context than, perhaps, teachers can find the conviction to implement the methods even when that requires extraordinary measures. One facet of in-service professional development might be a general introduction to the relationship between theory, practice, and philosophy.

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